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Statement submitted by Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and School Sisters of Notre Dame, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Adolescent girls are critical agents of change in poverty eradication. Empowering adolescent girls, especially girls in rural areas, spurs social and economic growth and leads to transformational change in normative discriminatory practices.

At present, there are 600 million adolescent girls living in poverty in the developing world, while 60 per cent of the world's chronically hungry people are women and girls. Positive interventions on behalf of adolescent girls, in particular those living in extreme poverty, are now considered by both researchers and practitioners to have a significant impact on improving the life of the entire community. When girls have safe places to meet, together with access to secondary education, legal protection, health care, training, job skills and decision-making, they can thrive. And if they thrive, everyone around them thrives as well.

Identity

Discrimination against girls begins at birth or in some societies even before they are born, as a result of female foeticide, infanticide, malnutrition and neglect. Each year, nearly 50 million newborns remain unregistered, primarily in the rural areas of developing countries. Inadequate infrastructure, low awareness among parents, the cost of obtaining a birth certificate and discrimination based on gender and ethnicity all contribute to this reality.

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents. A birth certificate is the first step in ensuring that all children have a legal existence and enjoy their basic rights. It facilitates access to education and health care; acts as a protection against child labour and early marriage; and makes it easier to fight abuse and child trafficking. If a girl cannot prove that she is still a child, she is more vulnerable to being forced into early marriage, servitude or prostitution.

Discriminatory social practices

Poverty eradication will come about only if systemic and structural causes are addressed, including normative practices that support discrimination and violence against girls. Prevailing traditional customs and cultural practices have a significant negative influence on girls throughout the world, especially those living in rural communities. Essential barriers include educational bias, child labour and social norms that support gender-based violence such as female genital circumcision.

Gender roles, expectations and obligations limit educational, social and economic opportunities for girls. Girls are expected to participate in the daily labour needed for the family to survive, such as cultivating crops, tending livestock, carrying water, gathering firewood, cooking, cleaning and caring for younger children and elderly relatives. This prevents them from attending school on a regular basis, often requiring that they leave school at an early age. Rural girls suffer the triple disadvantage of age, gender and location.

Early and forced marriage

The practice of child marriage, most prevalent in poor, rural communities, perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Forced marriage, deemed by elders as a means to protect girls, in fact limits their education and potential earning capacity, making them vulnerable in numerous ways. Lacking knowledge and income-producing skills, young brides tend to remain trapped in chronic poverty with few educational, economic or social opportunities.

Early marriage also has a negative impact on the health and development of young women, resulting in serious medical conditions such as obstetric fistula, complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth, disabling injury or even death. Currently, the primary causes of death among girls aged 15 to 19 throughout the world are medical complications arising from pregnancy. In Timor-Leste, for example, the maternal mortality rate for this age group is as high as 20 per cent.

Education

There is a direct relationship between the length of time a girl is permitted to stay at school and breaking the poverty cycle. An extra year of primary school boosts girls' wage-earning capacity by 10 to 20 per cent; while an extra year of secondary school increases that capacity by 15 to 25 per cent. Steps to encourage girls to stay in secondary school lead to even greater benefits. According to a report by the Chicago Council entitled "Girls grow: a vital force in rural communities", an increase of 1 per cent in female secondary school attendance can add 0.3 per cent to the country's average annual per capita income growth. Interventions that enable young women to stay in school, avoid early pregnancy and delay marriage are therefore critical to their financial independence and productivity as members of society. Educated girls are more likely to resist pressure to marry too young and thus resign themselves to unpaid work. They are also much more likely to send their own girls to school.

According to the same report, a decrease in fertility rates is also linked to girls' education, meaning that the higher the level of education, the fewer children a woman is likely to have. It also states that doubling the proportion of women with a secondary education would reduce average global fertility rates from 5.3 to 3.9 children per woman. A larger, more productive workforce, associated with higher levels of female education and increased economic growth, has been called the "demographic dividend".

It has also been found that the time an adolescent girl spends in school also affects other factors such as her health and that of her children. For example, the children of educated mothers are more likely to be better nourished and attend school. Programmes that improve the quality of sanitation and hygiene for girls, including appropriate privacy, have had a remarkable success rate in terms of extending secondary school attendance. Moreover, educated women are more likely to participate in civic life and to advocate for community improvements.

Affirmative action for girls in terms of cash transfers or payment of school fees are proving to be highly effective strategies. Interventions that eliminate the burden of school fees for girls act as a circuit breaker in such circumstances.

Conclusion

There is a growing consensus among researchers and practitioners that interventions to improve the life of adolescent girls, particularly those living in chronic poverty, have a significant impact. Investing in adolescent girls' educational and employment opportunities has a large developmental impact on their families and their future children, with long-term benefits for poverty reduction and sustainable development. As the Executive Director of Women and Population at the United Nations Foundation stated, an adolescent girl living in poverty could be the most powerful person in the world. If she is reached early enough, she can accelerate economies, arrest major global health issues and break cycles of poverty.

Recommendations

We therefore urge Member States to:

- Establish and enforce birth registration laws and maintain official records of the legal identity of all citizens
- Mandate the legal age for marriage and establish guidelines for implementation
- Address the social and cultural practices that support violence and discrimination against girls
- Ensure that all girls have access to quality primary and secondary school plus vocational training
- Provide incentives for parents to keep girls in school, such as the payment of fees, cash transfers, school feeding and sanitation programmes.

Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: American Association of University Women, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, International Council of Jewish Women, International Movement for Fraternal Union among Races and Peoples, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, League of Women Voters of the United States, Pan Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association, Perhaps Kids Meeting Kids Can Make a Difference, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Salvation Army, To Love Children Educational Foundation International, UNANIMA International.